THE BRIDGE

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*This story's action is set in early-20th century Russia, but it deals with a situation that could happen anywhere in the world. If you have ever felt unsure of yourself or of your future, you'll see that the conflict in "The Bridge" is universal. As you read, think of how the story's title points directly to its theme.*

"I just can't see him going," Gramma said, turning over the potato cake in the pan with a knife. "He's scared of everything." "He'll go," Aunt Nadya replied from the depth of the kitchen. "He has to go. He'll be better off there."

Gramma sighed loudly. She wasn't at all convinced Kostya would be better off there.

Kostya had heard every word. He stood not far from the open window amid the currant shrubs, quickly picking the berries and shoving them into his mouth. Since it had been decided he would have to go away, Kostya was spending hours at a time in these shrubs, their luxurious, end-of-July growth serving as an excellent hiding place. He liked to be alone and not have to talk to anyone. Through the branches creeping over the windowsill into the shade-filled kitchen, he could see Gramma's hands moving over the kerosene burner and hear the sizzling of the frying pancakes.

"He's scared of everything . . . everything," Gramma repeated. "He's afraid to buy a stamp in the post office. How'll he go?"

Kostya's mouth was getting sour from the berries. He worked his way out of the shrubbery, found his bicycle on the dark porch, and he opened the kitchen door. Aunt Nadya was peeling potatoes—since it was Sunday she hadn't gone to work in the factory but was helping Gramma. The peels coiled like spirals over Aunt Nadya's thick, manlike fingers. Gramma, a squat, little woman, had just turned over another sizzling pancake. She looked up at the boy. Kostya knew that the mountain of potato cakes piled up in a plate at the burner was being baked for him—one more sign that his going-away was final.

"I'm going for a little ride," he said glumly, hoisting the small bicycle over his shoulder.

Gramma sighed, stepping heavily from foot to foot. "Go on, have your last ride," Aunt Nadya told him without lifting her face from the potatoes. "You won't be doing it there."

Kostya walked the bicycle through the open wicket[[1]](#footnote-1) and threw his long leg over the frame. The bike, a juvenile size bought a long time ago, had become too small for him. This year he had shot up to almost twice his previous height, though otherwise he remained the same: narrow shoulders, a thin neck with a protruding Adam's apple, and slightly protuberant[[2]](#footnote-2), translucent ears. Mechanically Kostya rode out into the alley, hedged by dusty elder thickets. His sharp knees almost touched his chin but he didn't mind—he was much too used to it. Mechanically he swerved to his left to cut into the open fields; he didn't want to meet anybody and didn't want anybody to disturb his thoughts.

Last spring after he was graduated from high school, barely getting promoted, Kostya had decided that going to the institute was out of the question. There had been a time his marks were no worse than anybody else's, but after his mother had died, a year and a half ago, he hadn't attended school for several months, and he had fallen too far behind to catch up.

Everybody in class had known that Kostya never learned his lessons. He had become shy and unsure of himself, and the shyness had compounded his confusion whenever he'd been called to the blackboard.

And then his awkwardness. In company he'd either keep quiet or blurt out anything that came to his mind, then feel ashamed of himself. He had begun to avoid people, go swimming by himself, had even given up the soccer team. Once he had been shortchanged in the bakery shop, and instead of reminding the saleswoman that she had made a mistake, he had told his grandmother that he had lost the money. Gramma was the only one with whom he felt at ease, unafraid. But now he'd have to leave her. . . .

This was the third year Gramma hadn't worked in the factory but had lived on her pension. Aunt Nadya had four little children; her husband had gone into construction work somewhere on the Volga[[3]](#footnote-3); and there were rumors he had himself another woman—for the last year he hadn't sent home a kopeck[[4]](#footnote-4). The whole settlement where Kostya had been born and lived all his starless seventeen years was made up of people working in the factory. It was a women's factory where a true man wouldn't be caught working. Lads would leave the settlement as soon as they were graduated, and Kostya, too, would have to leave and stop living at Gramma's and Aunt Nadya's expense. But where? Uncle Vassily Petrovitch, Gramma's brother, had asked him to come, promising Gramma to take good care of him and find him a job. Everybody had thought that this was good and right, that a bright future was ahead of him . . . everybody but Kostya. Deep inside he was afraid nothing would come out of it, yet he didn't dare tell anybody.

He didn't dare confess to anybody how frightening was the thought of leaving Gramma. Uncle Vassily Petrovitch loomed in Kostya's mind like a cold, strict old man of whom even Gramma was afraid. Quite often she had warned him "not to do anything to spite your uncle." Uncle Vasya had left for Siberia many years ago, before Kostya was even born, when his mother was still a little girl. He had been a tugboat captain on that great Siberian river that flows into the Arctic Ocean, but now he was more than that—he was a chief over a whole fleet of boats. Kostya often saw this river on a large map hanging in the classroom; with all its winding tributaries it reminded him of some strange plant with many weird roots stretching and stretching. . . . Uncle Vasya often asked that Kostya come. "I'll enter him in the River Technicum[[5]](#footnote-5) together with my son Kolya," he wrote. "They will drill them there so that in three years both of them will become fine navigators." When Gramma had read that letter she flinched and cast Kostya a frightened look at the word "drill." And yet tonight they would go to the railroad station and wait for the Moscow train arriving at five in the morning. He would leave all by himself for Moscow, the unfamiliar big city he had never seen before, and in Moscow he'd have to find his way to another railroad station, board another train leaving for Siberia, and he'd be all by himself with nothing to remind him of Gramma's comfort apart from the potato pancakes in the basket. . . .

It was a warm but sunless, overcast day. Kostya rode out of the settlement and turned onto the highway running amid wavy fields. To the right, about three kilometers away, stretched the river—wide at times, hiding at times behind soft hills. The cloud-covered sky seemed to be hanging low over the usually busy highway, now deserted because it was Sunday. A warm, hay-scented breeze caressed the boy's face, as though careful not to disturb his thinking.

Deep in his thoughts, Kostya pushed the pedals, unaware of a little bird that kept perching on a telegraph post ahead of him, swinging its long tail, and seeming to wait until he caught up with it, then flying up again, perching on another post, farther away, and waiting again. The boy did not notice it nor the old, thick-leaved linden trees—the remnants of an old road on which this highway was constructed—shooting up here and there like petrified explosions.

Kostya pedaled onward where the gray ribbon of the macadam[[6]](#footnote-6) ran into the sunless twilight, rising softly or sloping gently.

Each time Kostya reached a crest of the wavy road, he had an excellent view to the next crest. Each time he was on the top of a hill he could see a green depression through which the road made a straight cut, first running down then up toward the crest where it butted against the sky and disappeared.

Hurdling one of these crests, Kostya sighted in the distance a minute, colored dot moving in the same direction. It occurred to him he might have noticed it before but had paid it no attention. There might have been a two-kilometer span between them—he only had a glimpse of it, looming blue and yellow, before it reached the next crest and vanished.

Kostya began to pedal faster. He dashed downhill, bouncing over a little bridge that spanned the two banks of a gully, then climbed the uphill stretch, using the impetus gained from the down-drive. He hurdled the crest and saw again the yellow-blue dot—bigger now, just beginning to move up the next rise. The distance between them had been shortened considerably; he could see it was somebody on a bicycle. How odd, he thought, so gaily dressed, yellow on top, blue below. Quite intrigued, Kostya leaned forward, pumping harder and harder, trying for greater speed.

As soon as he came over the next crest, he realized that the cyclist ahead of him was a girl wearing a blue skirt and yellow blouse, her fair hair falling down her back. She had been pedaling unhurriedly until she heard him coming from behind. As she turned her face to him, the glimpse Kostya caught was brief: a round, babyish face. There were still about two hundred meters separating them, and when she turned away again, her plump, little calves in the white socks began to push harder—the girl didn't want to be outdistanced.

She spurted ahead. Kostya leaned forward on the bars, pumping with all his might. Yet he was unable to cut the distance by much—she seemed to be quite good. On the next rise he appeared to gain a little, but when they came down the slope and the bikes rolled on their own, he stayed back somewhat. Her bike's better than mine, he thought. Yet the excitement of the chase added will to his strength—on the next rise he gained considerably and covered the next downhill stretch, long as it was, without giving in a meter. Now he could see her well; no more than thirteen or fourteen. At times the girl turned her head slightly, seeming to try to catch a glimpse of him from the corner of her eye. Then he saw her chubby cheek, and a moment later he'd see her trying desperately to keep him from catching up with her. But he was drawing inexorably closer.

The girl's hair fluttered in the wind, exposing the back of her neck. They sped out of the fields, plunging into a forest of aspen, spruce, and birch trees that seemed to rise into a solid wall. As the distance between the bicycles stubbornly decreased, Kostya was overcome by a sense of triumph. The girl's glances were more frequent; every time she tried to have a look at him her bike made a little zigzag, and he gained a few meters. He was sure now to catch up with her, probably on the next rise.

A recently laid asphalt road turned off the highway into the forest, right at the start of the rise. Kostya knew where it led: toward the river where a new bridge was being built to connect the state farms on both sides. But what he did not suspect was that the pursued bicycle would turn off to that road.

The girl made the turn abruptly. It was so sudden that he almost flashed by. She might have thought he would follow the highway and stop pursuing her. But Kostya had become so intensely elated that all he could think of now was catching up with her. He, too, swerved from the highway and spurted after her.

The road was downhill all the way. Both bicycles were tearing down at their maximum speeds, the girl steadily about ten meters ahead of Kostya. But he didn't care anymore—the road only led to the bridge now under construction, and she'd have no choice but to stop there.

The road approached the bridge at an angle; through the tree trunks at the right, the mirror of the river flashed far below under its steep bank.

Cement barrels, sifters, and wooden scaffolding loomed before their eyes, together with piles upon piles of scrap concrete—the unfinished structure was right in front of them.

The bridgework had no top layer yet but it spanned both banks. It looked like a net scaled by a formless hodgepodge of wood in which the future metallic slickness could only be vaguely surmised. Now because it was Sunday, instead of the unceasing hum of work, a deep silence stood over the river.

Everything happened so fast that Kostya had no time to consider the danger. Suddenly he saw that the asphalt was coming to an end, and a four-plank trestle, laid over a sand embankment, led to the bridge. The girl pedaled ahead at top speed. Kostya was so shocked that before he had time to recover his wits he found himself, too, bouncing along those planks. He gripped the bar firmly to avoid veering off onto the sand. But the sand wasn't what bothered him. What frightened him was the realization that the trestle ran from the embankment onto the truss, across the unfenced iron girders which served as a narrow path for the bridge workers—high above the water. Was she insane? She was coming to the end of the embankment without slowing down!

"Brake! Brake!" he managed to shout out. But then he choked on his own words.

The girl half turned at the sound of his voice. Again she glanced at him from the corner of one eye. Her bicycle, making a slight zigzag, almost pulled her off the planks. But she managed to straighten out the wheel and spurt straight ahead, onto the truss, over the narrow path suspended high above the water.

Something is terribly wrong here, flashed through Kostya's mind. He should have braked short of the bridge but for some uncanny reason he hadn't done so. His bike carried him onto the truss, onto those same planks, high above the water. . . .

There was no more time to stop, turn, or look back. The only way was straight ahead—with no letup of speed. His hand must not jerk. He knew he couldn't stand the suspense; he'd weaken from fear. But he must go on . . . because of her .. . because her bike was straight ahead. . . .

Kostya couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl. She rode evenly, unswervingly, yet he sensed a desperate tension in that straightness. How can she stand it! Oh, if she only doesn't get it into her head to look back! How far is it to the end of the bridge? If she can only keep her hand from jerking! If only she'll not try to look back! She's over more than half—one more minute, and it'll be all over. Just that she doesn't look back!

The girl did look back.

She turned her head just slightly, just to make sure from the corner of her eye that he was behind. As she turned, her front wheel gave a slight jerk. A second, a long eternity, she struggled with it, trying to make it straight. But she couldn't. Her bike veered into the air, into emptiness. . . .

He didn't see her fall. She simply disappeared from the bridge—she and her bike. Abruptly he did something he had thought was impossible—he put on the brakes and jumped off onto the planks. He looked down. The water was way, way down, glistening with a dull, firm shine like a metal—streaming away, somewhere beyond the bridge. He saw her bike, caught by its frame at the end of a beam, sticking out from behind the rough scaffolding, still swinging slightly. But the girl was nowhere in sight.

Stunned, Kostya put down his bike and dived.

He pierced the surface of the water with his hands and felt it close above him as he was dragged down by the current. Although stung by the fall, he had the presence of mind to open his eyes and look for her. All he could see were hazy outlines of some huge blocks and posts. After touching the bottom, he felt himself pulled up. He turned over under the water and surfaced.

The current pulled him to the bridge span. He came close to a concrete abutment not cleared yet of some wooden casing and piles of lumber. Above, fragments of the cloudy sky seemed to be peeking through the many-storied net of girders, crossbeams, and timbering. The current was strong, too strong for any resistance. Kostya drifted with it, turning, whirling, not even trying to fight it until . . . he saw her, just around the bend.

The top of her head appeared behind a pile of timber sticking out of the water at the bridge span. Up to her mouth in water, the girl clutched the pile with both hands, right in front of a foaming whirl. Kostya couldn't see her whole face but her cheek and one eye, and from the look of that eye—large, frightened—he knew that she was holding with her last strength. One more moment and the current would carry her away.

"Hold on!" he shouted, choking on a mouthful of water. Now there was only one thing to be afraid of, that the current would carry him by her. He'd never be able to get back to her against it. Kostya tried desperately to gain control of his movements. His wet trousers and canvas slippers hampered his effort. Nonetheless, he managed to throw out his left arm and grab that same pile. As the current whirled him around and around he hung on, his shoulder touching hers.

The girl's pale, wet face was close to his, her wide-open eyes bright with tension. He hoped she would believe that he would be able to save her. But how? He didn't have the slightest idea himself what to do next.

High up, the concrete abutment towered like a tremendous giant. Its surface was too smooth to offer a hold. Kostya looked back—behind them the river grew wide.

"You know how to swim?" he asked.

She shook her head.

Kostya knew that the girl couldn't hold on much longer. He looked back again; the left bank was not too far away. By himself he'd probably make it. To the right, in the direction of the current, the river made a bend. To the left, oblong stones jutted out of the water. There, he should try to get over there. . . .

He looked at the girl again. He'd have to act fast, as long as she still had some strength left. "Let go," he ordered.

"No, no."

"You must listen to me," he said gravely. He pulled her hand away from the pile and tried to put it on his shoulder. Immediately her other hand slipped off the pile and now the girl clung to him with both hands. Under the burden Kostya let go, and both of them began to sink. The whirl pulled them under. In desperation he forcibly pried open her hands and pushed her away. Thrashing wildly, the girl rose to the surface by herself.

He, too, came up, snorted, and looked around. The girl kept thrashing right beside him. Her round face rose for a moment out of the water; her mouth gasped for air before she began to sink again. The bridge with all its mass of iron and wood seemed to be rapidly backing away.

Kostya wound her short, chubby arm around his neck. Her other arm which was about to clutch him he pushed aside. "Don't you dare," he said sternly. "You must obey me."

She obeyed and stopped clinging to him. As they began to float more steadily, Kostya struggled stubbornly, stroking with one arm and cutting across the current toward the stones. The girl's soft arm rested confidently, though heavily, against his neck, pressing his face into the water. But Kostya knew how to handle himself. As long as her face remained above water, he'd be able to lift his head for a breath of air, then let it be submerged.

The girl stopped struggling. She calmed down and obviously had more confidence in him than he had in himself. "I'll do whatever you say," she whispered into his ear. But he felt he was weakening, and he was afraid the current would not let them reach the stones. He tried to drift to the shore but the whirls carried him to the right, around the stones, toward the rapids. Two times he tried to reach bottom with his feet; on the third try he touched it.

Although the water reached above his ears, he managed to keep afloat. The shallow from which the stones protruded had apparently extended quite far. Seeing him stand, the girl tried to stand up too. After she swallowed some water and choked, Kostya picked her up and, stepping carefully, he carried her to the shore.

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting on the sloping bank amid elm trees, watching the water through the branches. Their clothes were hung on the trees to dry—he had only his trunks on, she had on panties and a white undershirt. Her semi-nakedness embarrassed him; he tried not to sit too close to her nor glance at her too often. She, however, seemed not to mind. Her innocent, bright eyes were full of confidence as they admired him through strands of wet hair that kept falling onto her face.

Their bicycles lay side by side on the grass. Kostya had removed them from the bridge by himself. The zeal of achievement had made him feel light and fearless. It hadn't been too difficult to get his bicycle, although when he had stepped onto those planks once again he had asked himself how he was able to ride on that narrow, unfenced path. An hour ago he'd probably not have had the courage to walk on it; but now he ambled without fear, without having to look at his feet. To recover the girl's bike wasn't that easy; he had to clamber down the timbering and hoist the thing with his feet while hanging on the girder with his hands. He had enjoyed his work, however, knowing that she stood there on the shore, watching him, admiring him. He hadn't been afraid to fall into the water because that would have only been a repeat jump. But he had been concerned he might drop the bicycle. He hadn't. He rolled them both up onto the shore, toward the elm tree where their clothes were hung to dry.

"You can do everything." The girl looked at Kostya with admiring eyes.

"I can," he confirmed. "Had I dropped your bike I'd have given you mine." He felt like being extremely generous; as a matter of fact, he was sorry he couldn't give her his bike.

"I'd not have taken it for anything," she said. "You are leaving?"

"Yes, tonight."

"For long?"

"Forever."

"And when will you come back?" she asked. "Probably never."

The impression his words made on her affected him too.

"Never," the girl repeated slowly. "How far are you going?"

"Very far," he replied. "I'm taking the Moscow train tonight."

She asked if he was going to the district capital. She had apparently thought the district capital was very far.

"Uh uh," Kostya said. "The day after tomorrow I'll be in Moscow."

"In Moscow?" she asked respectfully.

"But only for a day," he explained. "Got to do some sightseeing."

"You're going even farther?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded. "To Siberia[[7]](#footnote-7)."

She became quiet. He sensed how impressive that name sounded to her.

"Who's going with you?" she asked again.

"I'm going by myself."

While he answered her questions, Kostya began to see his trip in a new light. He had suddenly made a discovery—he found out something about himself he had never known: he could accomplish tasks. The future, which up to now had appeared fearful, suddenly became a grandiose adventure within reach.

"I'll guide big ships," Kostya said, getting up from excitement. "Diesel motor ships."

"Where to?"

"To the Arctic Ocean. Beyond the Arctic Circle and back. Through the taiga, tundra[[8]](#footnote-8), all kinds of animals," Kostya recalled what he knew about Siberia. He was waiting for her to ask if he really knew how to guide diesel motor ships, but she didn't. Perhaps she had some doubts if he really could do everything. He, too, had some doubts.

"I'll learn," he said, thinking of Uncle Vasya. "What one man can do another man can, too."

There was silence for a while. Narrow-shouldered, long-legged, upright, Kostya stared into the water glistening through the trees. Absorbed in his new ideas, he seemed to have forgotten about the girl who sat with her arms around her round knees, glancing at him timidly from time to time.

"Is somebody coming to see you off?" she asked softly.

"They are." He nodded.

"Who?"

Kostya knew that Gramma and Aunt Nadya would come with him to the station, but somehow he didn't feel like telling it to the girl. He made no reply.

"I'll come too, may I?" she asked in a pattering whisper, brushing off her wet hair from her forehead. "We live next to the station. I'll just jump out of the window and run up. May I?" The girl talked fast, as if she were afraid he might stop her. "I won't be in anybody's way, they won't even see me. I'll just watch. May I, may I?"

Kostya didn't answer. He looked at her with a joyous wonderment in his heart—it was a hitherto unknown tenderness which he realized was also a new discovery.

1. wicket: *n.* small gate [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. protuberant: *adj.* sticking out. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Volga: *pn.* an important rover in Russia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. kopeck: *n.* a Russian coin that is worth about a penny. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. River Technicum: *pn.* a naval training school. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. macadam: *n.* tar road. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Siberia: *pn.* A very cold and isolated region in northern part of Russia that is comparable to Alaska. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. taiga, tundra: *n.* The taiga is an evergreen forest region. North of it lies the tundra, a treeless plain whose subsoil level is permanently frozen. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)